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LITERATURE AS A NECESSITY OF LIFE.

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THE ROLE OF LITERATURE HAS CHANGED AND TODAY, FOR THE FIRST TIME, GREAT LITERATURE HAS TO MAKE A CLAIM FOR ITSELF. FOR MANY STUDENTS BEGINNING COLLEGE, LITERATURE HAS NOT BEEN AN IMPORTANT PART OF THEIR LIVES. THEY SHOULD BE TOLD WHAT IT IS AND BE INTRODUCED TO MANY BOOKS, ESPECIALLY CONTEMPORARY ONES, WHICH PEOPLE USED TO READ FOR THEMSELVES. ALTHOUGH ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS NOW EXIST, PROFESSIONAL CONCERN WITH LITERATURE IS NO GUARANTEE OF MORAL IMAGINATION OR UNUSUAL INTELLIGENCE. THE MAJOR QUESTION IS HOW A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY CAN FIND SELF-EVIDENT A TRADITION FOUNDED ON THE INSIGHTS OF A SELECT FEW. NOR CAN THE GREAT TRADITION BE SELF-EVIDENT TO STUDENTS WHOSE EDUCATION OFTEN HAS BEEN UTILITARIAN AND WHOSE TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE DIMINISH THE INTELLECTUAL AUTHORITY OF RELIGION. EFFORTS TO RE-ESTABLISH THE LITERARY TRADITION HAVE BEEN MADE BY T.S. ELIOT AND OTHERS, AND TODAY, DESPITE THE EMPHASIS ON THE CONCEPTUAL, ABSTRACT, AND MANIPULATIVE, MUCH CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE EXPRESSES THE SPIRIT AND PARADOX OF MAN'S CONDITION. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW," SECTION 7, JULY 30, 1967, PAGES 3-4, 30. (BN)

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Literature as a Necessity of Life

By ALFRED KAZIN

EVERY now and then I meet people — they tend to be physicists, psychiatrists, theologians — who are well read in English and European literature, well read in a thoroughly cultivated, old-fashioned way, who have managed this steadily from childhood while perfecting special knowledge of a wholly different field. These people don't know what it means to major in English, for they have grown up with literature as one of the many traditions that people used to grow up with.

Universities, too, used to be this old-fashioned. Until well into the 19th century, there was no special chair for English literature at Oxford or Cambridge. Literature was classical literature, the great tradition of Greece and Rome which was supposed to have descended from the great tragedians, poets, moralists, rhetoricians and sages, right down to the latest British Prime Minister — Gladstone still translated Homer and could still put down a critic in Parliament with a quotation from Horace. There was a tradition — classical, Christian, humanist, aristocratic — that embodied the *humanitas* of Christian Europe as against those outsiders from Asia whom the Greeks had called barbarians.

This tradition was founded on the metaphysics of Plato, on the truth of Christian revelation, on the Renaissance code of the gentleman, on theology as the queen of the sciences. In the days when science was still called natural philosophy, the proper study of man was man, which meant moral philosophy — questions of value that depended on the right interpretation, in some immediate human context, of the great tradition. Because there was a great tradition, literature in the universities meant the preservation and transmission of classical literature— and this included classical politics, history, philosophy and ethics as well as tragedy, epic and lyric.

There was no need for courses in Shakespeare when Shakespeare, whose religious views were ambiguous anyway, could be read for oneself, seen in the playhouse, enjoyed in private precisely because he was so much more robust and bawdy than Cicero. Like the contemporary physicist or psychiatrist who reads great novels for pleasure, 19th-century statesmen, bishops, scientists, and political revolutionaries found the great books simply necessary. Maxim Gorky says that in 1919, amid the frightful cold and hunger of war Communism, he found Lenin in the Kremlin reading "War and Peace." One remembers the devotion of Marx to Balzac, of Freud to Dostoevsky, as one remembers John Quincy Adams translating German Romantic poems, Lincoln shakenly quoting from "Macbeth" when he had a vision of his end. Even General de Gaulle, whose family sponsors a Victorianism of official taste that is one of the many reversals that the French have had to bear, wittily quoted Villon when one of his ministers spoke of censoring Sartre.

There are still people, there used to be many more such people, to whom literature is familiar and necessary, a personal tradition in the van of a still greater tradition. To these people, literature, among other virtues, embodies the great past; it is the storybook of human experience; through its past move forever, as in the other-world of Dante, the great heroes, thinkers, sages, saints and villains.

Recall how absurd the teaching of one's own literature once seemed to the best literary scholars, to cultivated people generally. Compare that confidence with the extraordinary effort and concern that we now put into the teaching of modern literature, American literature, contemporary literature, freshman composition, public speaking, remedial reading, elementary grammar. Put into the picture, too, the extraordinary number of people, extremely intelligent, highly competent, perfectly civil and humane, to whom great literature means absolutely nothing, who manage to get along without Shakespeare and Tolstoy. When Napoleon asked Pierre Laplace how God figured in his theory of the universe, the great astronomer replied that he had no need of that hypothesis. There are now many intelligent people, active in the professions and sciences, who have no need of imaginative literature.

Not for them the raptures of Lenin

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fore "War and Peace," the emo-
n Lincoln displayed at a single
eech from "Macbeth," the shudder
awe that Goethe thought man's
epest experience and that Robert
ppenheimer felt one morning in
44, in the New Mexican desert,
hen he saw the first atom bomb
plode. So far as the world's rulers,
erywhere, are concerned, Shake-
eare *was* Bacon and Bacon Shake-
eare.

There was a time in the early
enties when young Communists in
ussia gave up smoking so that Tol-
oy could be printed on cigarette
per, but when Andrey Sinyavsky
d Yuri Daniel were sentenced to
rd labor for the crime of sending
eir honest stories and essays where
ey could be published, most Rus-
ans, it is safe to say, were as un-
ncerned as most Americans are
concerned when the poet Robert
well declines an invitation to read
the White House as his way of
otesting our part in Vietnam.

Literature, which used to be the
een of the arts, is, so far as many
ople now are concerned, simply
t where the world's wisdom and
perience, and above all its future,
e felt to lie.

Yet English departments, that mod-
n invention, seem to get bigger
d busier all the time, to take in
ore and more periods, approaches,
riters, and even writers-as-teach-
s. How misleading all laments over
e past can be. The past is so
uch our business that it cannot
lp obstructing our view of our
vn situation. This is in point of
ct the most revolutionary era in
corded history, the most thorough-
ing transformation of established
bits of living and thinking that
s ever been known. It is not pos-
ble, it is not meaningful, that the
easure that certain aristocratic po-
cians in England took in Homer
nety years ago should be a criti-
sm of the overpoweringly dynamic
ciety and fiercely democratic as-
rations by which many of us live.

N the days when Gladstone trans-
ted Homer for his own pleasure,
great portion of the British com-
on people lived in squalor and ig-
orance, and children could still be
nged for petty thievery. In 19th-
entury Russia, the sum total of op-
ression and misery was in such
ntrast to the imaginative achieve-
ents of a few aristocrats who wrote
vels that the greatest talent and
ost powerful conscience among
ese aristocrats, Tolstoy, could not
ar the disparity and tried as des-
rately as any saint ever did to
nvert men to charity by the force
his own example. One needn't,
rhaps, go as far as that marvel-
sly gifted writer, Jean-Paul Sar-
e, who says that literature is in-
nificant now, so long as it does
t the hunger and humilia-
n ed by millions of people

in Asia, Africa and Latin America. But the greatest moral fact of our time *is* our awareness that everybody counts, that life could surely be better for millions of people whose existence did not matter to the rest of us just twenty years ago.

By contrast with so much remedial social suffering, the culture offered by literature can be very superficial indeed. If we ask the vital question of what literature does *for* us, how it changes us, how it uplifts and sustains and unites us, what is the *use* of so much reading, how it advances us in knowledge and sympathy and moral consciousness — such claims for literature were made by Shelley and Keats and Matthew Arnold with the highest confidence — then we have to say, thinking of all too many examples, that literature is often no use to those who know it most intimately and who know most about it.

Many a German professor who was moved by the perfection of a Rilke sonnet had no feeling for the many so-called inferior beings whom his countrymen slaughtered in their racial pride. It is my experience of people skilled in literature, either as writers or scholars, that professional concern with literature is by no means a guarantee of unusual intelligence or moral imagination; literature for them is professional, a skill as technical and self-sufficient as any other — especially for those who possess this skill.

Yet no matter how much one insists on the autonomy of literature, one knows that this is only a half-truth, the truth about literature seen from the side of the creator or the specialist, not from the broad response to literature made by human experience through the ages. For when we ask why there have always been scientists to whom literature is of the highest importance, why Darwin found his consolation in good novels, why so many of the world's greatest thinkers have felt, as Freud did about Dostoevsky, that before literary genius analysis lays down its arms, we recognize that, until our day, great literature never *had* to make any claim for itself.

To all educated people, which meant people with a sense of history, literature was the word, the sacred word of all great tradition — religious, philosophic, moral and scientific. Great literature was mimesis and poesis — it was the image of life, the image of human action and, as Coleridge said, of the soul in activity. It was the making of a thing of beauty, evident and sufficient unto itself, that afforded man, in his fullest esthetic capacity, a sense of sublimity, of elevation, of the highest truth captured in the greatest possible enjoyment. Matthew Arnold, on his journeys as a school inspector, would read over to himself in his pocket diary, as from a breviary, the famous quotations he had collected from Homer and Sophocles and Dante — perfectly sure that we needs must know the best that has been thought and said in the world.

Arnold was just as aware as we are today that science was progressing by leaps and bounds, where literature, it may be said, has no need to progress, for it is concerned with the permanent elements in human nature, with what Faulkner at Stockholm was to call "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed — love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice . . . ." But Arnold still believed that Europe represented a great humanist tradition, that even when supernaturalism succumbed to skepticism, the memory of Europe's tradition, embodied in its greatest works of literature, would serve as a consolation, a mediator of the many single facts being discovered by science. The thoughtful individual would always possess literature as his key to the great tradition. Arnold called his quotations touchstones.

The great tradition no longer exists. It is because the greatest experience of all contemporaries, more than the anguished cries for social justice of the oppressed, is some sense of absurdity involved in the almost complete de-sacralizing of all intellectual activity, that our students now turn so eagerly to humanities and great books courses, to those 19th-century novels that people used to read for themselves. It is because literature is not part of their tradition, had not entered into their lives before they came to college, that our students have to

ld what literature is and why literature is great.

s because the question of ques- — what is our destiny, how hall think of our own death — never been more open than it w that our students encounter astonishment, with rapture, unconscious gratitude, and who rs with how much unconscious tment, the dialectic of Plato, ublime certainty of Moses and , the vision of Dante, the Heav- nd Hell of Milton, the torrents nguage in Shakespeare, the pen- ion of Pascal, the irony of Jane en, the revolutionary passion of e. Intellectually and spiritually, students do not know that the l has been invented, and try to t themselves. That is how de- d they are — and how clever.

t everyone of good sense rec- zes that culture in the old sense, culture founded on literature, ex- ed the limited aspiration of a small group of people. Hence teacher of literature in America, ng to the brightest but most elieving generation that ever has to introduce his students atan, Jonah, Elijah, Agamem- Aeneas, Ulysses, Falstaff, even kleberry Finn; and sometimes, ager are we now to try *anything* will get students to recognize share of common humanity, to len Caulfield, Seymour Glass and salesman who had a death in ur Miller. . . .

the face of this extraordinary rance and this extraordinary ea- ess, of so much carrot and so stick, so many moral bribes cajolings, one can, of course, k loftily about inadequate train- at home and the dangers of education. But speaking as eone whose own culture is entirely literary-historical, I would ask: how *can* our democratic society find self-evident the great tradition founded on the exquisite perceptions of a few? And, above all, how is it possible, at a time when every crucial social, intellectual and political experience diminishes the intellectual authority of religion, to suppose that the great tradition is self-evident to students who know only too well how utilitarian their education must be, and who are being pushed and harried so that they will not be left behind in the terrible race for their own and the national advantage?

This is where modern literature comes into our curriculum — and literary criticism as a way of articulating values. There was a time when teachers limited English literature to dead authors: the limits of investigation for scholars were vaguely fixed at 1914, when all late Victorians conveniently expired. The assumption, then, was that behind the steady and logical development of English literature ran one increasing purpose; contemporary literature, which one read for oneself, would no doubt some day be added to this tradition.

But the particular mark of the greatest modern literature *is* that it sees man as unaided—"a stranger and afraid," said A. E. Housman "in a world I never made" — face to face with what Conrad in "Heart of Darkness" called "the horror," and in "Lord Jim," the "destructive element." The great thing about modern literature — one sees its beginnings at the end of the 18th century, that seedtime of revolutions — is the attempt to put man himself, his real self, his creative nature, squarely into his imaginative picture *(Continued on Page 30)*

(Continued from Page 5)

of the world—to have him confront his destiny, unaided and even defenseless as he is, and so give his culture, which he alone makes, the strength now exerted by his fear of death.

People who are easily dismayed by change, who do not see man in a long enough perspective, often think of modern and contemporary literature as nihilistic. But there are always fewer nihilists around than one thinks, and in literature they are especially rare; it requires an original mind, like Nietzsche's, even to conceive of a fundamental heresy in man's spiritual orientation. The great 20th-century writers, like T. S. Eliot, who naturally began their careers by trying new forms, now seem to us, as thinkers, wholly traditional. But what no one who knows Eliot's poetry and critcism can miss is the extraordinary effort that this man put into re-establishing the literary tradition and the moral insights of the church when the unity of the continent and the integrity of the past had been destroyed in man's minds by the horrors of 1914-18.

So in our day, remembering the thirty million dead of the Second World War, the savage despotism that now rules more than half the world, the powerlessness and the increasing sense of nemesis about the Third World War that sensitive people must feel about the drift of affairs in our own country, one looks to the works of Robert Graves, Evelyn Waugh, E. M. Forster, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Osborne, J. D. Salinger, Robert Lowell, James Baldwin, Edmund Wilson—as to the work of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Colette, François Mauriac, Boris Pasternak — to find again the defense of man, man in the full integrity of his personal experience and his complex human nature, man who creates reality as much as he perceives it.

Everything in our society just now emphasizes the conceptual, abstract, manipulative and even anxious side of man. But only in modern literature, in the courageous novels and stories, plays and essays of all our contemporaries in spirit, is justice done to what is not, after all, always mediatable by reason—to what is unknown perhaps because it is unknowable and even irrational—to that which belongs to man's dream life, to his inner life, to the buried life, as Matthew Arnold called it, he possesses in imagination—

But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us — to know
Whence our lives come and where they go.
And many a man in his own breast then delves,
But deep enough, alas! none ever mines.
And we have been on many thousand lines,
And we have shown, on each spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves—

Only in literature can man express the full paradox of his condition, the urgency of his private symbols—and above all else, the directness, the uniqueness, the concreteness of his being man, *this* man, and not any one else. As against the many empty claims to knowledge that fill the air, the poet can say, with E. E. Cummings—

when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret still will be man.